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Subject: Mountain West News Daily Newsletter
Date: Wednesday, March 18, 2015 1:39:40 PM



 Madison Range, Hilgard Peak

Photo courtesy of Rick and Susie Graetz

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Mountain West News is a
program of the
O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West at
The University of Montana

**Wednesday,
March 18, 2015**

Produced by Shellie Nelson, MW News Editor

Editor's notes:

In the **Rockies today**, rangeland restoration, solar power and wolf management are all in the news today.

The Bureau of Land Management's proposal to treat 250,000 acres in Idaho by removing sagebrush from 175,000 acres and reseeding the understory and by removing Douglas fir from another 75,000 acres to improve those lands for sage grouse is under fire, with one critic charging that the restoration work is more about improving graze for cattle than about sage grouse habitat.

Also in Idaho, the state may be awash in solar-generated power within the next few years, electricity Idaho Power said it doesn't really need.

Utah lawmakers have again decided that it's worth half a million dollars to keep wolves out of the Beehive State. The \$500,000 contract was awarded just hours before the legislative session adjourned for the year.

Also in the news, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said the federal government's final rule on the drilling method known as hydraulic fracturing will be released soon; and Colorado lawmakers were stunned to hear that the cost to build the much-delayed veterans hospital in Aurora had bloomed to \$1.73 billion, about five times the original cost.

Quote of the day:

"There are just more straws in there than there is water. It's been going on for a long time."

Charles Burt, chairman of the Irrigation Training and Research Center at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, about the [overpumping of groundwater from the Central Valley aquifer in California](#) that will eventually force 1 million to 1.5 million acres of farmland out of production within the next few years.
- Los Angeles Times

Rockies today

[Mountain West Voices](#)

[On the Bookshelf](#)

[Mountain West Perspectives](#)

[A Look Ahead](#)

A Look Ahead

Feb. 3-March 24: [Wilderness Lecture series hosted by the Wilderness Institute at the University of Montana in Missoula](#)

March 24: David James Duncan
"Mountains and rivers are
myself turned inside-out:
Tales of the wild

April 8: Panel discussion on
"Keeping it wild in the 21st
century: Wilderness for a new
generation"

[Western Governors Association's Drought Forum](#). [Register](#) now for these webinars:

March 25: "Managing Forest
Health for Water Resources"

April 8: "One Size Doesn't Fit All:
Why Variation in Hydrology and
Legal Structures means that
Drought Looks Different across
the West"

April 1-May 1: [Water in the American West](#), a free, online college level course, offered by The Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences and Western Water Assessment at the University of Colorado. Register [now](#).

On the Bookshelf

Barbara Theroux of Fact & Fiction

[BLM's plan for 250,000 acres of Idaho land under fire](#)

The Bureau of Land Management released a plan to treat 250,000 acres of land within the Challis and Salmon districts to improve habitat for sage grouse that would eradicate "decadent" sagebrush stands and reseed with desired plants on 175,000 acres and remove Douglas fir from 75,000 acres, but one of the scientists who recently questioned the federal government's sage grouse conservation efforts said that there is little evidence that previous such habitat treatment projects have actually helped sage grouse, and a former director with Western Watersheds Project said that the BLM's plan appears to be more focused on restoring rangelands for cows to graze than for sage grouse.

Idaho Mountain Express (Sun Valley); March 18

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[Solar-power companies in Idaho predict bright future](#)

Over the past six months, the Idaho Public Utilities Commission has approved deals for 13 solar projects capable of producing 400 megawatts of power, and the slate of solar-power companies in the Gem State believe that new technologies for storing solar-generated power and a worldwide desire for renewable energy will power the industry beyond 2016, when the current 30 percent federal tax investment credit for renewable energy projects drops to 10 percent. Idaho Power is resisting new solar projects because the utility said demand for the additional power just isn't there.

Idaho Statesman; March 18

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[Utah Legislature provides another \\$500K to lobbyist to keep wolves away](#)

Last Thursday, just a couple of hours before the Utah Legislature adjourned, a few million dollars of funding was discovered, and Spanish Fork Republican Rep. Mike McKell successfully lobbied to spend \$500,000 to renew a contract with Ryan Benson, a lawyer affiliated with Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, to continue his efforts lobbying to get Utah included in proposed federal legislation that orders the secretary of Interior to remove wolves in Wyoming and the Western Great Lakes region from the federal endangered species list.

Salt Lake Tribune; March 18

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[Interior Secretary Jewell says federal fracking rules on their way](#)

During a speech Tuesday at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C. that covered a broad range of energy issues, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said that revised regulations on the drilling method known as hydraulic fracturing would be rolled out in the near future.

Casper Star-Tribune; March 18

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- [Watch a 5-minute recap of Secretary Jewell's energy speech](#)

U.S. Department of Interior; March 18

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[Cost of VA hospital in Colorado increases to \\$1.7 billion](#)

The latest cost projection from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs on the Aurora veterans hospital was released Tuesday, and the \$1.73 billion revised cost is more than five times the original cost, putting the project in doubt.

Denver Post; March 18

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[Group seeks more protection for bull trout, grizzly bears in NW Montana](#)

Earthjustice petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for new protections of bull trout and grizzly bears in an area of northwestern Montana where Revett Minerals' idled Troy Mine is located due to lower copper prices, and where that company's proposed Rock Creek mine lies.

Missoulian; March 18

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[Montana's jobless rate in January down nearly a percent from last year](#)

The Montana Labor Department said unemployment edged down in January to 4.4 percent, and that Lincoln County's 13 percent jobless rate was the highest in the state, and Fallon County's 2.0 percent was the lowest. You can see a county-by-county map of jobless rates [here](#).

Flathead Beacon; March 18

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Water

[Dams, drought discussed on first day of Utah Water Conference](#)

An estimated 1,000 Utahns from across the state gathered in St. George on Tuesday for the first day of the Utah Water Users Association spring workshop, where a former commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation warned that both the Bureau of Reclamation's dam safety program, an important source of funding for western states to address their aging dams, and the WaterSmart program, which is often heralded for advancing water-saving efficiencies, may

reviews Liz Carlisle's '[Lentil Underground](#)'

Mountain West Perspectives

Montana's two-year colleges [revamp education to meet changing workplace demands](#)

Mountain West Voices

Hear the stories of the Mountain West:

- 3/16/2015:** [Crossing the Bering Sea](#)
- 2/27/2015:** [Remembering Iwo Jima](#)
- 1/28/2015:** [Cowboy For Hire](#)
- 12/23/2014:** [INSIDE LOOKING OUT: Native Voices in a Montana Prison](#)
- 12/5/2014:** [NKKWUSM: A Salish Education](#)

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run out of money.

Deseret News; March 18

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[Warmer weather melts away snowpack in Colorado's river basins](#)

March's warm weather has affected snowpack levels across Colorado's river basins, with levels in the mountains and valleys where the Colorado River originates at either 81 percent, or 91 percent, of average, depending on what baseline measurement is used.

Durango Herald (AP); March 18

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Opinion

[Bill to allow paddling on waterways in Yellowstone, Grand Teton parks should be scuttled](#)

The bill offered again this year by Wyoming U.S. Rep. Cynthia Lummis to open certain waterways in Grand Teton and Yellowstone National parks to hand-powered watercraft is, again, a bad idea that is not supported by science, and despite supporters' pledge that the bill will just open the issue to study, the language says otherwise. *A guest editorial by Franz Camenzind, a 45-year Jackson resident with a doctorate in zoology and wildlife ecology from the University of Wyoming, is a filmmaker, a wildlife biologist and the retired director of the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance.*

Jackson Hole News & Guide; March 18

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[Feeling flush, Utah legislators toss another \\$12M away on federal land fight](#)

The good news in the Utah Legislature's decision to spend another \$12 million on the state's futile fight with the federal government over federal lands and wildlife management is that it's unlikely the state will win, but the bad news is that the legislators decided to throw good money after bad to continue those fights.

Salt Lake Tribune; March 18

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[Montana legislator's focus on drones misguided](#)

State Rep. Jeff Essmann seems hell-bent on saving Montanans from the imagined menace posed by unmanned aircraft, even though Essman's latest bill appears to be a solution in search of a problem, and if the Billings Republican is interested in solving a real problem, perhaps he could lead his fellow legislators in finding a way to provide 70,000 uninsured Montanans with health care.

Billings Gazette; March 18

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[Banning the words 'climate change' doesn't change reality](#)

Florida officials' 2011 mandate to employees of the state's Department of Environmental Protection to use neither "climate change," nor "global warming," in official communications is a head-in-the-sand approach about a real threat to humans, and an interesting tactic in a state surrounded on three sides by water.

Idaho Mountain Express (Sun Valley); March 18

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Beyond the region

[Overpumping of groundwater in California valley bringing it down literally](#)

As the drought in California continues, irrigators in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys are increasing their use of groundwater from the Central Valley aquifer, rapidly depleting that aquifer -- and causing areas of the San Joaquin Valley to sink.

Los Angeles Times; March 18

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[California gets serious about water conservation as drought enters 4th year](#)

Snowpack levels in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, which supply California with 30 percent of its water, is at the second-lowest level since record-keeping began, and January, one of the months the state usually gets most of its rain, was unusually warm and dry, prompting state regulators on Tuesday to impose new restrictions on water use.

New York Times; March 18

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Legislature:

[Montana legislators send 'right-to-try' bill to Gov. Steve Bullock](#)

Community:

[AP request finds not all contractors' forthcoming about Idaho contract info](#)

Economy:

[Group said Idaho second only to N.D. in 2014 construction job gains](#)

Legislature:

[Colorado House committee kills bill to protect mineral rights owners](#)

Environment:

[Warm weather nixes snowmobile hill climb in W. Wyoming](#)

Environment:

[Feeding of elk on national refuge in Wyoming to end this weekend](#)

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